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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NICOSIA 000896

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: THIRD-PLACE CANDIDATE STILL OPTIMISTIC

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Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Polling that shows him well behind front-runner incumbent President Tassos Papadopoulos and left-wing challenger Dimitris Christofias troubles DISY-backed presidential candidate Ioannis Kasoulides little.

In a meeting with Embassy officers November 8, the soft-spoken but articulate Kasoulides claimed that anecdotal evidence and internal surveys showed the true gap falling well within accepted margins for error. He recognized, however, the difficulties his campaign faced in confronting the well-financed, media-backed Papadopoulos and the growing-in-popularity Christofias. Job 1 for his communications team entailed overcoming the image of Kasoulides as a weak-willed technocrat unable to withstand "foreign demands" for a reintroduction of the "partitionist" 2004 Annan Plan, he revealed. The candidate would not attempt to mimic his rivals' aggressive, backwards-looking tactics, however, regardless of critics' demands that he play dirty, too. "Being a nice guy is what won me this candidacy," Kasoulides quipped. "I cannot change that." END SUMMARY.

Numbers Lie (He Hopes)

¶12. (C) Opinion polls released in early November reveal Kasoulides, at 26 percent, trailing Papadopoulos and Christofias by a half-dozen or more points. Worse, the trend tilted downward, and at an accelerated rate. "I don't understand these numbers," Kasoulides fretted. Supporters continued to pack rooms to hear him speak, he claimed, in both the cities and rural areas. Further, his team's own internal surveys showed the gap between him and front-runner Papadopoulos steady at three percent, a statistical tie by Cypriot polling standards. Pressed to explain the contradiction, Kasoulides argued that many Cypriots were reluctant to reveal their true voting intentions to unknown pollsters. None had predicted Papadopoulos's outright first-round win in 2003, for example.

¶13. (C) At this stage in the campaign, however, Kasoulides knew he ranked third in anyone's poll. Fifty percent of the electorate would support the candidate they perceived would best provide security, he explained. And in Cyprus, "security" meant the status quo, which he most definitely opposed. Papadopoulos had won in 2003 and led in 2007 by capitalizing on voters' fear of the unknown. The President's backers successfully portrayed him as the man who had

resisted the foreigners and the hated Annan Plan, and they were equally apt at labeling Kasoulides a U.S./ UK puppet and turncoat who aimed someday to reintroduce the UN initiative.

Be True to Your School

¶4. (C) Billboards plastered across Nicosia trumpet Kasoulides campaign planks, from halving Cypriots' mandatory military service to reducing the formidable tax first-time home buyers pay. His opponents, in contrast, have revealed few of their respective campaign pledges, focusing instead on their counterparts' perceived failings in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the April 2004 Annan referendum. Critics and supporters alike have argued that Kasoulides must join the fray, and that his campaign, by tackling so many issues at once, lacked focus. The candidate dismissed the criticism out-of-hand. "Cypriots DO care about the future," he reasoned, and Papadopoulos's constant return to the Annan Plan and referendum period left them dissatisfied. Kasoulides therefore intended to continue focusing on issues that affected Cypriots' daily lives.

¶5. (C) Nor would he adopt the President's pit-bull tactics and angry visage. "If the party wanted that, Nikos Anastasiades would be running in my place," Kasoulides retorted, referring to DISY's hard-nosed president who rarely shies from tussles (Reftel). Besides, the two-stage format of Cypriot elections meant that only foolish candidates alienated parties they might later be forced to engage. Kasoulides instead would search for a manner to connect with the aforementioned status quo-ers who doubted his leadership credentials, while refraining from dirty politics and continuing to push a pro-solution policy. "Cypriot must have both security and prospects for a solution. With Papadopoulos, they have only the former."

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Engineering the Comeback

¶6. (C) Autumn opinion polls offered little insight, Kasoulides surmised, since many Cypriot voters would wait until January or even February to make their final choice. He claimed that Papadopoulos's position was more precarious than most believed. DIKO, the President's party, was barely half the size of DISY and Christofias's AKEL; should each achieve 90 percent cohesion rates and co-opt a few DIKO and/or EDEK voters, Papadopoulos risked first-round elimination. Regrettably, a large chunk of DISY stalwarts, mainly hard-right nationalists who opposed the Annan Plan, saw a kindred spirit in Tassos Papadopoulos and were contemplating voting DIKO. Kasoulides pollsters had identified the potential converts and were working to maintain them in the ranks, however.

¶7. (C) Kasoulides turned to one campaign promise likely to win him some support: the reduction of Cypriot males' mandatory military service, at 26 months the second-longest (after Israel's) in the world. The candidate proposed lopping off a year, maintaining Cyprus's deterrent capabilities by augmenting the professional military by 2,500 combatants. Poorly-trained conscripts could not take advantage of available, advanced military technologies, Kasoulides asserted. By acquiring such systems, such as motion-tracking cameras for monitoring Buffer Zone incursions, a much-smaller force could offer greater defense. An integral component of Kasoulides's modernization campaign lay in establishing closer security relationships with allied nations; NATO's Partnership for Peace represented the perfect vehicle. If elected, he claimed he would urge Cyprus's historically non-aligned electorate to support an immediate application for PfP.

Comment

¶8. (C) We don't doubt that DISY's hand-picked crowds greet Kasoulides with warm smiles and applause at every stop; at heart he's a decent man who comprehends that Cypriots must confront societal and economic problems unrelated to the Cyprus Problem, and offers concrete proposals to solve them. Yet his continued optimism in the face of plunging polling strikes us as misguided or worse, insincere. Upon departing Kasoulides's office, DISY Deputy President Averoff Neophytou, a close Embassy contact who currently liaises between the campaign staff and party HQ, offered a far more depressing opinion over DISY's chances in February. Neophytou's observations strike us as more accurate.

SCHLICHER